

The sunlight in the dream was too bright, saturated with a golden hue that belonged to a different life. In the dream, I was eighteen again. The weight of my backpack felt light, floating, reflecting the feeling of euphoria in my chest. It was the last day of school. The final goal. I walked up the driveway, the gravel crunching satisfyingly under my sneakers. I reached out my hand toward the mailbox, my heart beating nervously as my fingers brushed against the cold metal.

That was all.

The white envelope shimmered, almost mocking me from the mailbox. My fingers trembled as I tore it open, the crisp paper whispering promises. Accepted. Full scholarship. Photography. The university. My university. It was time to leave this city, leave the stress behind, and become who I was meant to be. A burning sensation pricked behind my eyes, blurring the sun-drenched street. I scanned for his car, the familiar dented, mud-splattered sedan. There. He was home, for once. I just had to tell them. I had to come in and share the news. I placed my hand on the doorknob.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, the dream curdled.

The front door creaked open, swallowing me whole. The air thickened, turning sickly yellow, then a grimy gray. Everything warped, smudged, like a photograph left too long in the sun, like a film reel melting in a projector. A low, guttural wail echoed from the kitchen. Mom. Her sobs tore at the silence, punctuated by Dad's ragged, heavy breathing. My computer, a broken-screened sentinel, a spiderweb of fractured glass, glowed on the dining room table, its fractured display still legible: my conversations, my secrets, laid bare. I could see the open chat windows. Conversations with school friends. Private jokes. Confessions. Hearts.

The silence of the house was replaced by a wall of sound: his mother's high-pitched sobbing and the heavy, animalistic breathing of his father.

Est couldn't move. He was glued to the floor of the dining room.

His father stood over the table, his face twisted into a mask of pure hatred. He didn't look like a father; he looked like a stranger possessed by rage. He stood there, a towering shadow, his face contorted into something monstrous.

"Disgusting," he spat, the word a physical blow. "You are absolutely disgusting." I tried to hold the letter, I tried to say something, nothing came out. "Get out."

"Get out!"

The blow came out of nowhere. A heavy hand struck me on the side of my face, knocking me backwards. It slammed me against the wall and slid me down.

Mom's cries intensified, a desperate, broken melody. A sickening thud. My head snapped back. The metallic tang of blood bloomed in my mouth. He shoved me, his hand a vise on my shoulder, propelling me towards the door. I hurried to get up, but my father yelled horrible and vile things at me, words that hurt me more than the blow. He pushed me toward the door. The only thing I could taste was the sharp, metallic taste of blood flooding his mouth from the bite on his cheek.

"Lower your voice." Mom pleaded, her voice cracking. "The neighbors." Mother hissed through her tears, not looking at me, but at the window. "The neighbors will hear you!"

She didn't care that I was hurt. She cared that the illusion of her perfect family was crumbling.

His roars followed me down the steps, a torrent of vile words, each one a fresh wound. The door slammed shut, severing the last thread. The metallic taste lingered, thick and coppery on my tongue.

I wake up with a start, my body convulsing as if I had really been thrown onto the pavement.

My eyes flew open, the scream stuck in my throat, the ceiling a blurry canvas above me. My chest heaved, each breath a struggle against an invisible weight. Tears, hot and stinging, traced paths through the cold sweat on my temples. The memory was so vivid that I could still feel the phantom pain in my cheek. The phantom taste of blood still clung to my palate, a cruel reminder. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the images away, pushing them back into the dark recesses of my mind.

He wasn't eighteen. He was twenty-four. He was safe.

Get up, he told himself. You have to get up.

I had to get up. My body ached, every muscle a knot of tension. The sterile scent of my small apartment offered no comfort. Yesterday's echo, my boss's smug lecture on 'mutual support' before handing me the pink slip, still buzzed in my ears. At least I had this last paycheck. Enough for rent. Enough to survive. It was enough to pay this month's rent, but what about after that? Nothing.

The shower offered a momentary reprieve, the hot water scalding away some of the chill that had settled deep in my bones. I dressed quickly, pulling on a t-shirt and jeans. There was only one place to go. One person.

I grabbed my keys and stepped out into the city air. The sky was cloudy, gray like my mood. I was headed to the only place that made me feel like I was in a sanctuary: Ink & Ashes. It was a tattoo studio owned by Tui, his friend from college.

He was the one who helped him navigate the chaos of college after Est arrived with nothing but a suitcase and a scholarship. He knew the story. He wouldn't ask why Est looked like he hadn't slept in a week.

The bell above the door of Ink & Ashes chimed, a cheerful sound that felt utterly out of place. The rich scent of disinfectant and burning incense, a familiar comfort, washed over me. Tattoo machines buzzed softly in the background, a rhythmic hum that usually soothed me. Today, it felt like a dull throb behind my eyes. I wiped my boots on the doormat, trying to ignore the trembling of my hands.

"Est?" A warm voice cut through the air. "You're early. I didn't expect you until... well, I didn't expect you."

Tui emerged from the back, his brown hair a wild tangle around his face, His eyes, usually bright with mischief, softened when they met mine. He wore a paint-splattered apron over a faded band t-shirt, He stopped short, his smile faltering.

"Hey." I managed, my voice a dry rasp.

He closed the distance between us in two long strides, his hand reaching out, warm and firm, settling on my shoulder. "What happened? You look like you've been wrestling a ghost."

I flinched, the word too close to the truth. "Something like that."

"What are you doing here? I thought you were going to photograph the cover of that indie band's album this week." He guided me to a plush, oversized armchair in the corner, a relic from some forgotten antique store. The chair swallowed me whole, its worn velvet a strange comfort. He knelt before me, his gaze unwavering. "Talk to me, Est. What's going on?"

My throat tightened. "I...I had the dream again."

His thumb stroked my arm, a gentle, rhythmic pressure. "The one with your dad?"

I nodded, unable to speak, the memory still fresh, still raw. The metallic tang, still there.

"He kicked you out again?" His voice was soft, laced with a familiar sadness.

"It was worse this time." I choked out, my voice cracking. "The blood. The shouting. Mom crying. Her asking him to lower his voice so the neighbors wouldn't hear." A bitter laugh escaped me, hollow and broken. "As if that was the worst part."

Tui's hand moved from my arm to cup my cheek, his touch grounding. "Est, it wasn't your fault."

"I know." a lie. "But it feels like it. It always feels like it." I looked around the studio, at the vibrant art on the walls, the hum of creativity. "I just...I needed to be here. Needed to see a friendly face."

"Always, Est. You know that." He sat on the floor beside the chair, leaning against its armrest, his presence a solid anchor. "So, the dream. What else?"

I took a shaky breath. "It wasn't just the dream. It was...everything. The way it ended."

He tilted his head, his brow furrowed. "Ended? The memory?"

"No. My job." The words tumbled out, a dam breaking. "I got fired yesterday."

A sharp intake of breath. "Fired? What happened?"

"My boss. Said I wasn't 'contributing to the team spirit.' Said I was too quiet, too distant." I scoffed. "He gave me a lecture on mutual support. The irony, right?"

Tui shook his head slowly. "That's... that's a load of bullshit, Est. You're one of the most observant, thoughtful people I know. Your photographs, they speak volumes."

"Not enough for him, apparently." I ran a hand through my messy black hair, pulling at the strands. "So, no job. One paycheck left." A beat of silence stretched between us, filled only by the distant hum of the tattoo machines.

"Est." he began, his voice laced with concern. "why didn't you say anything?"

"What was I supposed to say? 'Hey, Tui, my life is falling apart, can I crash on your couch and eat your food until I figure things out?'" I stared at the intricate patterns on the faded rug beneath my feet. "I didn't want to be a burden."

"A burden?" Tui pushed himself up, leaning over me, his hands resting on the arms of the chair, effectively trapping me. His eyes, usually so light, were dark with intensity. "Est, we've known each other since we were scrawny scholarship kids trying to figure out which end of a camera was up. You're family. You're never a burden."

"But..." I started, but he cut me off.

"No 'buts.' You think I wouldn't do the same for you? If I was in a jam, you'd be the first person I called. You're always there for me, listening to my crazy ideas, talking me down when I'm about to set fire to the studio because a client wants a tribal tattoo on their ass." A faint smile touched his lips, then faded. "This is different, Est. This is serious."

"I know it's serious." I whispered, shame washing over me. "That's why I'm here. I don't... I don't know what to do."

He pulled a small stool closer, sitting opposite me, his knees almost touching mine. "Okay. First, You already do the studio's portfolio shots for free every month.."

My head snapped up. "Tui, I can't just..."

"You can. You will." His voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. "Second, we figure out your next move. What kind of photography were you doing?"

"Commercial stuff. Product shots, mostly. Some corporate events." I sighed. "It paid the bills. Barely."

"And it wasn't what you wanted, was it?" he asked, his gaze piercing. "That dream of yours... Asia. Capturing moments, raw and real. That's why you studied photography, isn't it?"

The words hit me, a painful reminder of a dream I'd let fade under the weight of reality. "Yes. But dreams don't pay the rent, Tui."

"Maybe not directly. But passion fuels everything else." He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Look, I have a few contacts. People who appreciate real talent, not just 'team spirit.' And I need a new photographer for the studio. Someone to capture our work, our artists, the vibe here."

My heart gave a tiny, hopeful flutter, then immediately slammed back down. "Tui, you don't have to do that. I can't just take advantage..."

"Take advantage?" He snorted. "Est, look around. This place is my life. My art. I need someone who gets it. Someone who sees the story in every line, every shade of ink. Someone who understands the pain, the joy, the transformation. You're that person." He paused, his eyes scanning my face, reading every unspoken fear. "And besides, it's not charity. You're good. Damn good. You'd be doing me a favor."

I swallowed, the lingering metallic taste in my mouth finally beginning to recede. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." He flashed a quick, genuine smile. "We can start tomorrow. Get you set up. You can use my old darkroom for processing if you want. We'll figure out the pay, something fair. Something that helps you get back on your feet, Not 'friend discount'."

A wave of relief, so potent it almost brought me to my knees, washed over me. "Tui... I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything, Just let me help." He reached out, his hand covering mine, squeezing gently. "That's what friends do, Est. That's what family does."

The word 'family' hung in the air, a stark contrast to the memory of my father's rage. My eyes stung again, but this time, it wasn't from sadness. It was something

else. Gratitude. Hope.

“So, what do you think?” He smiled cheerfully, as always. He tossed me a magnetic card. “And if you’re serious about staying in photography, I’ll teach you tattoo photography. It’s niche, but it pays.” he prompted, his thumb tracing patterns on the back of my hand. “Ready to trade corporate blandness for the wild, creative chaos of Ink & Ashes?”

A shaky laugh escaped me, the first genuine one in days. “Wild, creative chaos sounds a lot better than ‘mutual support’ right now.”

He grinned, a flash of white against his skin. “Excellent. Now, let’s get that storage room cleared out. And then, we’re going to get you something to eat. You look like you haven’t eaten in days.”

I hadn’t, not really. The thought of food had been sickening. But now, a faint tremor of hunger stirred in my stomach. “Okay.” I said, my voice stronger than before. “Okay, Tui.”

He stood, pulling me up with him. “Good. And don’t even think about that dream right now. Focus on this. On us. We’ll get through this, Est. We always do.” He clapped me on the back, a comforting weight. “Now, come on. Let’s make some art. And maybe, just maybe, start planning that trip to Asia.”

The scent of incense and ink, the distant hum of the machines, Inside, the space was a haven of creativity. Shelves lined with tattoo supplies, a large, well-lit work table, and a few comfortable chairs for clients. The walls were covered with vibrant abstract artwork and photos of tattoos done by local tattoo artists. The music was soft, a mix of indie rock and jazz, and the air was filled with the murmur of conversation.

For the first time since waking, the metallic taste in my mouth finally vanished, replaced by the faint, sweet promise of something new.